DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 212 TE 002 854

AUTHOR MacPhee, Angus
TITLE Children's Writing.
PUB DATE Oct 71
NOTE 13p.
JOURNAL CIT CITE Newsletter; v5 n1 p14-26 October 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Art Appreciation; *Children; *Composition (Literary); *Creative Expression; Educational Change; *Instructional Materials; Poetry; Self Concept; Standards; Teacher Influence; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

The proper approach to children's writing from an educational point of view is discussed. The point is made that there is something fundamentally wrong with the current approach in children's writing. Current books on children's writing deal only with children's writing. It is recommended that any program which aims to be efficient in the teaching of children's writing should incorporate and exercise as part of its methodology those modes of writing which are appropriate to life outside the school. The kinds of change recommended for children's writing education are those which would instill in a child: (1) a deeper awareness and understanding of himself, (2) a wider and deeper sympathetic understanding of others, (3) a fuller understanding of his own position in time and space, (4) a fuller awareness and understanding of the living (non-human) world, (5) a more highly developed and refined aesthetic awareness, and (6) the ability to express these appropriately. Illustrations of writing which portray some of these qualities are given. Different types of writing are also discussed. These include personal, impersonal, and imaginative. (CK)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 061 212
TE 002 854

CITE Newsletter, Vol. 5, No. 1, October 1971.

CHILDREN'S WRITING

ANGUS MacPHEE
Lecturer in English, Hamilton College of Education

That there is something fundamentally wrong with our whole approach to children's writing seems to me to be indicated by the fact that there are many books published which enumerate enough subjects and techniques to keep any teacher going for a lifetime. Yet the search for subjects and techniques goes on undiminished. There is a feeling that the road has somehow not taken us where we really want to go; and we keep on trudging along the same road, exhilarated from time to time by recurring mirages.

Our first misconception, it seems to me, is that children's writing can be usefully considered as a discrete element in the school curriculum. Books on children's writing which *only* deal with children's writing, and unit studies of children's writing which are *only* studies of children's writing in Colleges of Education seem to me therefore to be misconceived. And the nub of my complaint is that I see children's writing not as an end in itself, but as an educational method and a source of evidence about the child's understanding, perceptions and attitudes. To those who would argue that adults in our society need to write to live and that children should therefore be educated to write as an end in itself, I would say that any programme of work which does not incorporate and exercise as part of its methodology those modes of writing which are appropriate to life outside the school is to that extent deficient. When asked what in particular they are talking about, these people usually pause reflectively and then suggest letter-writing and filling in forms, hardly preoccupying concerns for the educationist.

I want, briefly to consider the context in which I will deal with writing as an educational method and source of evidence. In education we are always trying to change our pupils in ways which we consider to be desirable. The kinds of change I would want to see in a child are:

(a) a deeper awareness and understanding of himself;
(b) a wider and deeper sympathetic understanding of others;
(c) a fuller understanding of his own position in time and space;
(d) a fuller awareness and understanding of the living (non-human) world;
(e) a more highly developed and refined aesthetic awareness;
(f) the ability to express these appropriately.

This outline subsumes the acquisition of skills. The inclusion of further worthwhile aims would involve a change in the outline, not the principles that underlie what I have to say. Stated in this way the objectives can be seen just at that level which gives us a comprehensible large outline and also suggests classroom practice. On the other hand, general language objectives do not lead out in any way to classroom practice other than the arbitrary. They do not provide a touchstone of ultimate purposefulness. If I say that children should have a wider vocabulary or that they should be able to express themselves fluently, this gives me very little real help as to what I should actually do in the classroom; whereas if I say that the child should have a fuller understanding of his own position in time and space, I can straight away introduce the activities generated by some form of Social Studies programme within which the language activities will be dictated and given shape by the content. These language activities will be relevant to our ultimate objectives for the child. It is therefore possible to justify them. It is not sufficient to justify language activities in vague "involved with language" terms.

I want now to consider two pieces of children's writing in order to illustrate my general standpoint.

(1)

SPIDERS

Spiders are horrible and ugly, the very thought of them sends shivers down my spine.
This one has a bloated body, black and brown,
Its legs are long and spindly and fine,
The web is beautiful, dew-spangled, delicate,
But it is a trap.
The fly, though small, fights frantically, fiercely.

Janet Stainer.

(2)

I went to church we noticed a web in which was a lady spider and a man spider. The lady came up to the man waving her legs. they must have been mating and I think they are going to get married. and she has come to the right place to get married because she is living in a church . . . .

Which is the better piece of writing? The first must have a strong claim. It is more vivid. It has a wider range of vocabulary. There is a nice contrast between the treatment of the spider and the web. The second is undistinguished except for its rather amusing naivety. Yet when they are put into their respective contexts we see that for the teacher's purposes, the second is unquestionably the better piece of writing. For what do we mean when we ask, Which is the better piece of writing? We might mean, Which is the better piece as seen by the sub-editor who is only concerned with the thing itself and not with the circumstances in which it was produced or the effect of the writing on the writer? Or we might mean, Which piece has been a useful part of a process designed to educate? The teacher must clearly ask herself the second question. And she can only answer it when she is fully aware of the circumstances in which it was produced.

The value that the sub-editor on the one hand, and the teacher on the other, place on a piece of writing is different. Value, for the teacher (which she deduces by applying the same criteria as the sub-editor who is looking for excellence), inheres not in the writing, but in the effect the production of the writing has had on the child, and in the evidence about the child's understanding perceptions and attitudes which she derives from it, all of which has to be seen in relation to the context in which it was produced.

There are many children who write well in the sub-editor's terms, regardless of the circumstances or subject. We have long rejected the idea of walking into a classroom, chalking the subject for the weekly essay on the board, and sitting back. We reject the practice because we do not believe it to have any educational value. The sub-editor might value some of the products very highly.

The failure to make this distinction underlies much of the confusion in the whole subject of children's writing. It is this failure which leads us to look at children's writing as an end in itself rather than the means to an end, and so we think up sequences of classroom activities designed to culminate in a piece of writing and the teacher assumes the role of sub-editor for some universal magazine of childhood gems.

The educational value of a piece of writing can *never* be deduced from the writing itself.

Here now is a description of the circumstances in which each of the pieces of writing on the spider was produced. The first is from Margaret Langdon's widely acclaimed book *Intensive Writing*.

THE SPIDER ON THE WALL

It happened that April 1st was a weekday. For several years we have either been on holiday with an early Easter or, luckily, it has fallen on a Saturday. This year it fell on a school day and I could tell from the glint in the teenagers' eyes that they had not overlooked the fact. But they are only children after all, and shoelaces, mysterious packages, empty egg-shells and imaginary spiders brought back my own childhood efforts. I could still remember vividly the horror with which I had tried to brush off that—Spider! Imaginary Spider! Here was my opportunity to produce a strong emotion, yet a completely unembarrassing one.

The class was waiting with its usual tolerant lethargy.

" You'll only want your exercise books and pens today," I said. I watched their faces curtain still more. A test, they thought.

" Look. There's a spider on the wall a huge one. Quick—write down the first thing which comes into your head about it. Now—as quickly as you can."

Startled eyes jumped to the wall incredulous eyes looked back at me. What is she getting at? April fooling?

" Make it brief and snappy—don't stop to think, just write what *you* feel," I urged.

Hesitantly, at first, pens scratched on books, but before they had had time to cross out, correct or alter—

" Start on the next line, and say something about its body. Describe it as *you* see it."

This time they started more easily, a bit strange, but still—

" Another new line and write three adjectives about its legs."

" Now write of its web. Do you see any contrast between the spider and the web? Now round it off with a final sentence."

As they were writing, I stood silently, feeling the revulsion against the spider, real and intense, and hoping that some miracle would happen to cause these children to have the same feeling and to be able to write it down without any words having been given to them.

This time I prayed before I opened the books. " Please, just one. If only it has got through to just *one* of them."

SPIDERS

Spiders are horrible and ugly, the very thought of them sends shivers down my spine.
This one has a bloated body, black and brown,
Its legs are long and spindly and fine,
The web is beautiful, dew-spangled, delicate,
But it is a trap.
The fly, though small, fights frantically, fiercely.

Janet Stainer.

The first sentence showed me that the feeling had got through all right. The words, chosen quickly and emotionally, were firm, descriptive and real.

I turned to the next one.

A nasty spider is clinging to the wall.
His body is bulgy, squashy, bloated.
His legs are hairy, horribly black.
The web is precise and elegant, tucked away in a corner.
To catch an ugly fly, it is a pity to use so beautiful a web.
When the fly is caught, it is wrapped and stored away
For ugly, hungry spider.

Jennifer Pragnell.

Here again, was the same grasp of words, as if the emotion itself supplied the right word almost without thought.

But these were girls, careful, anxious to please and to do the right thing. What of the boys?

Deliberately I searched through the pile and found the book of a slapdash, careless boy whose work was a constant battleground for him and for me.

The spider is on the wall.
Quickly I hit it with a newspaper.
Its legs are long
They look ghostly in the dark.
Its body is fat, floppy and filthy,
Its web looks like a net,
A safety net in a circus.
The web catches the flies
The spider bites them,
And wraps them,
And keeps them,
Until it is hungry.

Philip Shears.

This was more forthright than the girls' efforts, but here again was the same directness of expression and individuality of treatment which made these writings real and valuable.

Naturally I had the realist in the class who started rather accusingly, " I can't see a spider on the wall," but he went on:

I hate the things anyway.
With bent skinny legs.
Why do they have to be so swollen and stout?
The beautiful web is a merciless trap for flies,
They are a menace, a scrawny menace.

David Beale.

So we were all satisfied.

Correction of the exercise I found very simple. There were few spelling mistakes and, apart from an occasional grammatical slip, there was little to alter. One or two children, clinging to the conventional style, had found it difficult to break their work into lines, and needed to be shown how much more effective the writing *looked* if it was written out in this way, though, of course, if it was well read, the effect would be the same however it was written, so long as it was correctly punctuated. With regard to the " breaking," I was most interested to find that so many children, right from the start, used a natural break with which to begin a new line, and that these breaks succeeded in giving the sentence its right emotional value and balance. I will refer to this again.

Though it was obvious that the children wrote a form of modern verse, I never gave a hint that they were producing poetry, but now I started to encourage them to be aware of their use of words.

We had lessons, for instance, on alliteration, which some children had used quite naturally and effectively in their first attempts. These

lessons were quite apart from the creative writing periods, and, though I hoped that the result would be transferred, I didn't labour the point when the children were engaged in the written work.

Throughout the year, I had insisted that the children read as much and as widely as possible. I barred nothing except the out and out "comic" and the modern, paper-backed travesty of a picture book. This, with the ever-present help of the television, had given the children a wide and good vocabulary, and I tried to encourage this by lessons on word associations and thought transference, showing how one word gives the thought of another. The children found this link most interesting to follow, with the natural result that their thoughts moved more freely and they discovered, to their surprise, that far from having not an idea in their heads as they had so often protested, having been given a start, ideas flowed in a most stimulating way and their thoughts quickened and became alive.

THE SPIDER

The spider is an ugly thing.
Its legs are long and hairy and jointed.
Its body is fat and ferocious,
It is not elegant at all.
I wonder that flies are attracted.
I would like to free the fly, but the spider might eat me.

Christopher Waters.

The poem given below was written some weeks later than the above, as a piece of free writing, but it was obviously inspired by the early stimulus.

THE SPIDER'S WEDDING

I sat on the barn's steps and watched the black spider coming towards me.
I felt like screaming
But I moved aside a little, and the dark creature went up a beam.
It stopped
And turned back
And stared at me, and stared.
It said,
"Move on. My business has nothing to do with you.
I shall stand here until you go."
So I moved on, looking back over my shoulder to see what it would do.
As it went on, I ran back silently to see.
After a few minutes, back the spider came
Proud now, with an air of arrogance.
By his side, walked shyly, another spider.
A new bride.
When they came by me they stood
And stared and stared,
Then they went on.
"Ha. A spider's wedding," I thought.

June Robinson.

The second piece of writing on the spider appears in an account of classroom practice taken from the S.L.A. publication, *Using Books in the Primary School.*

A STUDY OF SPIDERS

In another Oxfordshire school it was the infectious curiosity of an assistant teacher which led his class of 40 third year juniors to study spiders over a period of eleven months from September, 1960. Here is his account:

"My own interest in spiders had always been mainly one of fascination—tinged with dread. When, however, I read an absorbing book called *The Spider*, by John Crompton, I felt I knew a lot about spiders second-hand and the problem was how to acquire more first-hand knowledge while I still felt so hesitant about the living subject."

The teacher began to observe a female spider at home and to make experiments. One night a male appeared on the same web, and he was able to observe all the ritual of the mating act. He continues:

"I should not have realised what was happening if I had not just been reading a chapter of Mr Crompton's book on the courtship of spiders. This had a great impact on me, for I thought: how much of our observation of the natural world falls into this same category? We may see many interesting activities going on, really serious work of the insect world, which we may not understand without additional expert knowledge. I then thought, could I, perhaps, provide an extra pair of eyes for the children in my class—and what better way of learning about a subject than by teaching it?

"Thus was born the idea of a class study of spiders and, as it turned out, I learned many new and interesting things along with the children and gained a lot from them.

"We really became immersed in spiders—went out on spider hunts, explored the school

grounds and waste land roundabout, did a lot of observation of spiders wherever we could find them and, before long, the children were finding literally dozens.

" At this stage they were simply spiders, some large, others small, but gradually some children began to notice other differences, particularly in colouration and markings. Later, I persuaded them to look at the webs and it became apparent that there were differences there also.

" Actually the timing for all this was very fortunate, for in autumn all spiders are busy, so that there was no difficulty in obtaining specimens. Many that we found were actually feeding, while those which were not were eagerly provided with flies by the children. When asked what they thought the spider did with its food the class were unanimous: ' It eats it, Sir!' I suggested keeping watch on the web of any spider known to be feeding and obtaining any discarded bodies of insects. In this way they were able to discover that, in every case, the spider had fed by sucking the juices from its victim and had left only the dry shell.

" We found many females of that lovely species, Aranea Diadema or Garden Spider. If we found her web but not Diadema, a careful search would usually reveal her resting under a nearby leaf, but always with one leg held out—hanging on to her private ' telegraph wire ' which is the last thread laid down after completion of the web. By providing Diadema with living food, the children were soon able to discover the sinister intent behind the extension of that lady-like foot! Later on we became adept at finding any member of the Aranea family by first identifying the web, then locating the ' telegraph ' and, by running along that, coming to the body of the occupier herself.

" Perhaps our greatest find was what we christened the Tomato Spider, a beautiful creature with an enormous abdomen. In this one species, Aranea Reamuri, we found a remarkable colour range, from a vivid orange-red to delicate lime-green and yellow. The children looked upon her as their particular find and began handling her with real affection. They were now so keen that it seemed natural to bring spiders indoors and we had a great time drawing and painting.

" Other spiders came in uninvited. One such guest was discovered walking with great ease upon the ceiling. This was a cute little spider, prettily marked with black and white stripes, the Zebra Jumping spider, which stalks its prey and finally jumps on to it. It is the only class of spiders which can walk with facility on any surface, including a vertical sheet of glass. Its Latin name has such an alliterative quality that I decided to let the children use it. It is Salticus Scenicus—and how they loved to roll that off the tongue! From then on we used more of the Latin names.

" We also reached the stage quite quickly where the simple school reference books were not detailed enough, so I ordered a spider classic from the village library, John Blackwell's *A History of the Spiders of Great Britain and Ireland*. What excellent service we received, for the books (two volumes) soon arrived—on loan from Paisley reference library in Scotland. These we were able to keep for a month. I made them readily available to the class for reference and they undoubtedly lent a tremendous impetus to the work.

" In fact, when these great books were returned, I had a distinct feeling of depression, thinking that the lively work which had begun might peter out. Yet the interest of the class seemed to stay alive in the most natural and delightful way and the tempo of the work, if anything, increased. It is true to say, I am sure, that some of our best and most scientific work was achieved without the aid of any reference books, for when thrown upon our own resources we found we could still discover new and exciting facts about our subjects by direct observation and we still could classify—even by employing our own nomenclature!

" The cocoons we collected were carefully preserved throughout the winter, and in the following spring we had the satisfaction of seeing each one safely hatched out. I well remember the cry which went up in the class-room, announcing the first stirrings of life in one of the cocoons, and the excited vigil until the first adventurous baby had struggled from its silken bonds. Again, the children had a wonderful time making visual and written records of these happenings. For example, we were able to establish that, from the moment it leaves the cocoon, the baby spider is able to spin silk and does so with confidence. However, it was not until about ten days afterwards that some of the babies began constructing webs.

" Here is a written description by a nine-year-old girl of average ability: ' The cocoon we think is a crab spider cocoon, and is very

delicate. You can see through the spider's legs. It is so white and transparent. The body is a lot darker than the cephalo-thorax also the abdomen is very much like the crab spiders's because it is narrowest at the end near the cephalo-thorax, and wider at the rear. The babies are clumped together and you can see the empty egg shells. their legs are waving. You can already see two sharp eyes at the top of the cephalo-thorax. this is the third cocoon we have had in class . . . .'

" This is from the work of another nine-year-old girl of less then average ability: " . . . I went to church . . . we noticed a web in which was a lady spider and a man spider. The lady came up to the man waving her legs. they must have been mating and I think they are going to get married, and she has come to (the) right place to get married because she is living in a church . . . .' "

My general standpoint is that the kind of activity described in Margaret Langdon's account has little, if any, educational value, whereas the Oxfordshire teacher, who, unlike Margaret Langdon, was not primarily concerned to get good writing, nevertheless got it.

The following points and distinctions are germane to the rest of this essay.

(1) Margaret Langdon's writing was produced after a matter of seconds; the Oxfordshire teacher's somewhere, probably fairly late on, in a study extending over eleven months. In the former case the input was nil.

(2) Margaret Langdon wants good writing; the Oxfordshire teacher wants his pupils to learn.

(3) Margaret Langdon thinks of correction only at the formal level. She makes no attempt to relate the content to external positive values.

(4) A class is an administrative group. Activities such as writing should be potentially educative for all, and the judgment as to whether or not it has been can only be made by taking each piece separately and relating it to the child who produced it. " Just one " is not good enough, though it may be some comfort to the sub-editor.

(5) the Oxfordshire teacher seems happy to let the children and their writing speak for itself. The evidence in Margaret Langdon's case is contradictory. " I could still remember vividly the horror . . . here was my opportunity to produce a strong emotion . . . write what YOU feel . . . describe it as YOU see it . . . I stood silently, feeling the revulsion against the spider, real and intense, and hoping that some miracle would happen to cause these children to have the same feeling and to write it down without words having been given to them."

(6) The piece of writing, " The cocoon we think . . ." (doesn't the " we think " indicate an attractive attitude to what is being observed?) illustrates, among others, two interesting points. The first has to do with the acquisition of vocabulary. " Cephalo-thorax " is clearly a new word for this nine-year-old. She has acquired it in a meaningful context and she here uses it precisely and with obvious relish. The second point concerns the attitude to the spider. This is a piece of descriptive writing and implicit in it is an attitude to the subject being described. It is different from and much more subtly stated than the attitudes in the poems of Margaret Langdon's teenagers.

(7) Margaret Langdon states that her pupils' thoughts quickened and became alive. I would suggest that the Oxfordshire teacher's pupils had their thoughts quickened too. It is interesting to compare what we mean by " had their thoughts quickened " in the two cases. The second piece of writing quoted earlier is a piece of evidence that because of the study of spiders the world has become a fuller, more interesting, more comprehensible place to inhabit for this child. Even a spider provokes an interesting series of thoughts. In the same situation, Margaret Langdon's pupils would have presumably gone, " Yugh." The Oxfordshire teacher seems to me in this work to have helped his pupils to a " fuller understanding and awareness of the living (non-human) world. The writing was part of his methodology. I cannot fit Margaret Langdon's work into any of the objectives stated earlier. She seems to me to have taken the children further away from them.

At this point I want to try to enumerate the distinctive values of writing as an educational method.

(1) It is a deliberate and reflective process which ideally provokes a focus and heightening of attention.

(2) It is in permanent form and is more accessible to examination than, for example, tape-recorded speech. Permanence is necessary in data recorded for future use; in any state-

ment which will be visited again; where a time gap in communication is convenient or necessary.

(3) The possibility of shaping, giving form to a statement, is greater in writing. One can consciously modify and shape utterances after they have been made.

(4) Writing provides the teacher with evidence which gives her a base from which to educate and which she can consider while disengaged from the pupil.

I take it to be axiomatic that children should only be asked to write when we wish to avail ourselves of the distinctive values of writing.

I am now going to look at writing under the three headings: Personal, Imaginative and Impersonal. As preliminary definitions I offer the following: personal writing is written in the first person and is an expression of the lived experience of that person; imaginative writing is writing that could have been produced to satisfy the request to " imagine that . . . . "; impersonal writing is produced with the eye steady on the object. I do it this way simply to give me a convenient framework.

PERSONAL WRITING. I will include what is called Creative Writing in this category. Some of my comment here will be brief. More detailed comment will be found elsewhere, in particular under the heading Impersonal Writing.

It is frequently asserted about this kind of writing that one of its great values lies in the fact that children are led to express what they *really* think and what they *really* feel and that this is somehow noble and educative in itself. This leads to suggestions that it should not be " tampered with " in any way. For some it has an aura of the sacrosanct. But the point about a child saying what he really thinks and feels instead of expressing feelings and opinions calculated to please the teacher is that in the former case the teacher gets to know where the child is. The genuine expression provides her with an authentic base from which she can proceed to educate. There is nothing particularly noble about a child expressing a genuinely held belief that the world is flat, or in lavatorial graffiti. There may, of course, be a cathartic element, but this will not concern us. Mere catharsis is always destructive or potentially destructive. And that catharsis which is the natural by-product of new achievement, new insight, new understanding, cannot be separately or directly engineered.

I will consider what appear to be the three main kinds of personal writing.

(1) The child is asked to express his thoughts on or attitudes to an object, person or situation where the response has an emotional content. We talk of a " flow of feeling." The " good " subjects here are emotionally provocative.

(2) We look for subjects of personal significance to the child, where the function of the writing is variously put as helping the child to articulate his inner experience or interpret it to himself, helping the child to come to terms with experience, and/or releasing tensions within the child.

(3) Writing based on sense impressions.

I will deal with them in that order.

(1) The teacher should never make a direct appeal to the emotions as I hope to make clear later. Or, to put it another way, the feeling should never be elicited by the teacher; it should be elicited by the object of study. This is not an attempt at a clever quibble. It is the difference between Margaret Langdon's and the Oxfordshire teacher's approach to spiders.

(2) In this kind of writing the child would be expressing significant aspects of his inner life, his attitudes and dispositions, his hopes and fears, his response to important personal relationships.

And we just do not know what is of significance for the individual child at any given moment. It is, furthermore, a peculiar feature of personal and creative writing—in which it is claimed children express their individuality, their uniqueness—that the teacher chooses both content and mode of expression (i.e. writing). I would therefore suggest that this kind of writing should be produced if and when the child wants to produce it, on any subject that the child cares to write about. He would have a book specially for it and the teacher would be as undemanding as to say, " Here is a book. Any time that you have anything at all that you want to write about, be it a sentence or a more extended piece, put it in this book." Although the teacher might decide that individual pupils needed encouragement to write and so explored the possibilities with the individual, children generally would not be under any direct pressure to write in their personal writing books and it

would not make sense to consider even notionally the amount of writing that there should be in the book. Some people satisfy the functions of this kind of writing quite happily, for instance, in oral situations. We do it ourselves for most of the time. When there are a number of modes of expression open to the child there will be less danger of artificially forcing a heavy burden onto any one of them.

What we do with this writing when we get it is of crucial importance. We can either discuss it with the individual or read it out and discuss it with the class, attending first and foremost to the content of the writing. The ideal response from the teacher is always serious and humane interest. There is no need for disapproval and seldom need for explicit approval. For the child, his writing has already achieved status by being treated in this way. And the discussions themselves lead to an increase in the amount of writing produced by the class so that any temptation to encourage quantity early on should be resisted.

Where the child is writing about his interests, hobbies, etc., for the pleasure of it, or where he is expressing that natural human desire to be known, to be approved, to be valued, we can run through the pieces fairly quickly—though obviously not skimpingly. We can only learn from experience how much time to give to each piece. Where the child is either consciously or unconsciously trying to come to terms with experience and has failed, then we must give it fuller treatment. The one sure indication that a child has failed to come to terms with an experience, no matter how much intensity there might be in the writing, is formlessness. The " Primary Memorandum " tends to play down the importance of form in what it calls " free writing." But form is crucial. For what is it but that organisation and ordering which highlights significance and apportions due balance and stress throughout. Our ultimate aim in helping the child is that he should be able to fully realise the experience in a satisfying form, evidencing that he has come to terms with it. First the experience would have to be explored in discussion. The child is fortunate; he has the experience of his peers and the insight of his teacher to help him. On some occasions discussion will be enough; on others, where the discipline of writing was necessary, the teacher would require the child to produce a second draft. And always, the discussion of this piece will be the " correction " of the next. There need not be a mark on the page, but that is quite different from doing nothing about it, declaring the writing to be sacrosanct and so transmuting ignorance into awe. Clearly, too, there will be occasions when the next step will be objective studies or the reading of fiction.

Here, by the way, is a major source of purposeful classroom discussion. Those who have done this kind of thing will not want to look further for those subjects which will help the children to explore their own lives. They will certainly not look to the subjects conjured up by a man sitting in his study in Shropshire.

What I am suggesting is the exact opposite of what is often recommended. Instead of the sequence: teacher chooses the subject — discussion — writing, the child has chosen the subject, writes, and then there is discussion.

(3) That kind of writing where children examine an object or situation and document their sense impressions seems to be on the increase. I find it difficult to see what value there is in this writing apart from the fact that it provides a very easy lesson for the teacher because of the highly organised structure that can be imposed on it and the banal level of content at which it can be prosecuted. It seems to me to be a tarted up way of trying to give children vocabulary in a pseudo-context, though even then I fail to see why children should be writing it down. If it is to reinforce acquisition, then one must ask why the word, if it is at all important, is not being met with again and again in a variety of meaningful situations. The girl who used " cephalo-thorax " so often was not acquiring it, she was taking pleasure in using it within a meaningful statement.

Preumably one of the implied values is that it augments the child's awareness of the world. Exercise the senses and he will be more open to sense experience. And we go through the five senses documenting response. In these exercises all five senses generally have equal weight, although our sense of sight brings us incomparably more information than all the rest put together. Now the interesting thing is that an architect in Georgian Edinburgh or a botanist on a woodland walk actually *see* more than others not because they have been through endless exercises in which they documented their sense experience when they looked at pictures, or felt objects in a closed bag, or tasted Smarties to the tune of Honoegger's machine music; but

because they have considerable knowledge about the environment in which they are stationed. They did not exercise their perceptions on one object in order to help them to see another. That children should be as visually aware as possible goes without saying, but this awareness, like the acquisition of vocabulary, should be developed in contexts other than those specifically created for this purpose. If words are important, necessary, useful to the child there will be no need to devise special exercises in order to introduce them; they will be present to the child in a variety of contexts. If particular sense experiences are important they too will be continuously present in the work of the class without the need for imported exercises.

IMAGINATIVE WRITING. Take the case where the teacher tells the class the story of Scott's fatal journey from the South Pole. It is not unknown for teachers to come fairly quickly to the point where they require the children to produce a piece of writing in which they imagine that they are a member of Scott's party when food, fuel and hope have run out. They are asked to continue the story and/or write about their responses to the situation. If our intention here is to help children to an awareness of points in the range of human courage and endurance, there is nothing wrong with our intentions. Now part of the help which children are offered here, often before they begin to write, is to recall and discuss those occasions when the children were very cold, when they were very hungry, when they were very tired, when they were in despair, and this, at the moment of lifting the pen, is expected to throw them into a realisation of Scott's situation from the momentum of their own recollections. And of course they don't come within a mile of it. They can only talk about when they were very cold, when they were very hungry . . . and assign these experiences to Scott and his men. Far from fulfilling the original worthwhile intention, we are encasing them in their own experience and shutting them off from the experience of others. If we really want them to enter into an understanding of what it was like then we have the reports of those who actually experienced it. So much of the imaginative writing that children are asked to do is of this kind. The act of writing too often usurps the function of reading. There may be writing to be done in order to deepen the child's reading response, but that is another matter.

There is a use for teacher-directed imaginative writing and it is a very powerful one. Suppose we consider it worthwhile to lead a child to an understanding of what it was like for the Red Indians when they were being pushed off their land, we would start by making as exhaustive a study as possible of the objective nature of the culture and conditions of Red Indian life. If we now want the child to move through the imagination to an understanding of what it was like to live in these conditions, we can set up a specific situation or event and ask the child to respond to it in writing. Now any old response as long as it is " imaginative " won't do. The only adequate response would be one which was appropriate to the conditions of Red Indian life in general and the situation which we have set up in particular. And if an adequate response cannot be defined then the conditions of life have been inadequately researched or the exercise we have set up is a bad one. This is how we educate the imagination, not by prompting the child to elaborate guesswork.

The writing, furthermore, should be in the third person rather than the first. Although it might seem otherwise, the imaginative entry into understanding can only be impeded by using the first person. We don't want the child to respond as himself, we want him to understand the other.

One way of proceeding would be to state the plot of an event, and name the important characters involved in it. One of the characters might be called " Chuzak," a child of the same age as the child doing the writing. We now distance the child from the situation by giving him the opening words of the kind, " Chuzak walked towards the path and saw . . . ." If we succeed in our intentions the child will draw unconsciously on his own knowledge of what it is like to be a ten-year-old human being, but in a different situation and under different conditions from his own life. Complete understanding of course is a chimera, but this method will take us in the right direction.

It should never be necessary to ask a child how he would feel or how a Red Indian boy would feel in a particular situation. The situation should determine the response. To prompt from outside the situation is to prompt prejudice. That is what prejudice is.

Although it would not be necessary to ask him to spell it out in this way a child should, if he could articulate it, be able to say, " In this situation a Red Indian boy would feel thus or do such and such, but I would not because I am outside his situation, have different knowledge, belong to a different culture, have a different way of looking at things." That is the only hope for understanding of others. We don't want the ten-year-old Thomas Brown to imagine that the world is peopled with projections of ten-year-old Thomas Brown, because it is not. It has variety. To tell him to use the first person is to prompt him to deny it. We are all familiar with the adult response, " I don't understand X. If I had been him I would have . . . . I just don't understand him." Quite.

It is interesting to note at this point that in all teacher-directed writing there should be quite precise criteria at the level of content by which the success of the writing can be judged. In the case just considered we should be able to discuss with the child an inadequate response by pointing to those features in the situation which render it inadequate. And since all the children would be writing on the same situation this would be conducted as a class discussion.

Imaginative self-expression, which is what we have been trying to avoid in the Red Indian case, is best included with the freely produced personal writing of the child considered earlier.

IMPERSONAL WRITING. Some of the subjects I will consider here would normally fall under a different heading. I think, however, that there is a common factor which allows them to be considered together. I defined impersonal writing as writing with the eye on the object. " Object " here means everything outside the child including people. There seems to me to be a need to put much greater stress on a methodology where the eye is on the object in order to counteract the increasing tendency, especially in children's writing, to turn the child in on himself so that he looks out to the darkness from a well-lit room.

I want to go through a series of examples of writing situations and non-writing situations which begin at the objective end of the subjective/objective continuum and move towards the subjective end. First a word on the rational.

Human beings are capable of rational action because they have a language capacity which allows them to modify their behaviour at a higher level than S/R learning. The most interesting consequences for us are not those early experiences where a child may learn not to touch a fire because it burns, but the later experiences where language acts as a mediator and introduces the possibility of modifying behaviour in the light of reason. Although human beings act irrationally as well as rationally, we in education are always aiming at helping the child to rational response. We believe in values which give point to our work. To act rationally is, in MacMurray's words, " to act in terms of the nature of the object." Education seems to me to be largely the attempt to discover the nature of the object.

At the objective end of the subjective/objective continuum there are several kinds of writing which need little comment except to say that they should have a purpose beyond the production of the writing. Typical of these are the recording of data for future use, the marshalling of facts so that they are coherently and meaningfully related in order, for example, to be communicated to others, and the description of a process where the function of the writing is to focus attention and put pressure on the child to think through what he might otherwise view superficially in the belief that he has understood.

Although primary children do not have science as a discrete subject in the curriculum, they are frequently involved in scientific enquiry. This will involve the use of the kinds of writing mentioned in the last paragraph. Children's writing of this kind often has implicit in it attitudes to the object of study, especially where living things such as flowers or animals are being observed. This is one of the differences between what the child does and rigorous scientific reporting, where the intrusion of the emotions would be considered a fault. Yet we would welcome the aesthetic response here in education, because it is only in these conditions that the response has any value. Margaret Langdon's children found the spider ugly because they brought to their writing nothing but prejudice. In fact one sees from the two different studies of the spider that the two factors operating on the child's aesthetic awareness are real knowledge of the object and the teacher's attitude to it. Aesthetic writing

is not in itself a proper activity in school. The aesthetic response should be implicit in writing undertaken with a further purpose in view.

As with the aesthetic response, so with all areas of the curriculum where we wish the child to express attitudes. It is characteristic of Creative Writing that the teacher goes straight to the emotions and the children's writing reveals those hot-house attitudes which are so admired rather than attitudes informed, tempered and refined by knowledge of the object.

One of the most common forms of making a direct assault on the child's emotions is to use the child's fears as a stimulus to writing. The assumption is, presumably, that expressing fears is in itself worthwhile. I am at a loss to know how. If the fear is rational—fine. There is no need to write about it. If the fear is irrational, all we can do is to give greater exposure and examination to the object of the fear, not the fear itself. I am sure that in Margaret Longdon's class and in the Oxfordshire man's class there were children who had a genuine fear, not to say horror, of spiders. Margaret Langdon got them to express the horror; the Oxfordshire man examined the spiders. It is no accident that in life fear and ignorance are closely aligned.

Now those writing situations where children are asked to write about and display attitudes towards the unfortunate in society. Subjects that come to mind are the poor, the oppressed, the old, the Biafran child. We want children to have humane attitudes, sympathy for the unfortunate, not because these attitudes are good in themselves, but because they are motives to action, and the kinds of acts people perform depend upon the nature and strength of their attitudes and motives. People who are forever expressing sympathy are a pain in the neck; their sympathy is so often a substitute for action.

I prefer the term " sympathetic understanding " to " sympathy " because it animadverts us to the object of the sympathy. How then is this sympathetic understanding widened and deepened?

One way of proceeding would be to produce a picture of a gnarled old woman and ask the child to write about what she is thinking. One can believe that there are teachers who would be delighted to get bits of writing in which the old woman expressed poignant thoughts of loneliness or moving recollections of a hard life. It is very easy to introduce a provocative picture and invest it with a spurious and sentimental aura. Helping the child to a rational response is to help him to that area which is defined by the value judgments implicit in the terms " sentimental " and " cynical." And we cannot approach the area of rational response until we are aware of the nature of the object being responded to.

Similar to this are those situations where a child is asked to imagine what it would be like to be a Biafran child or some such unfortunate. The children are asked to imagine that they are such a person and given an experience which they have to respond to in that persona. But children not only cannot get beyond themselves simply by taking thought, the very process which is designed to do this has the effect of turning them in on themselves. Children should never be explicitly asked to imagine what it would be like to be someone else. They often are, in all those questions which have a similar import to, " What would you feel like if?"

We do want children to come to a sympathetic understanding of others, but we will not look to any kind of writing to generate the attitudes although it frequently seems to be an exclusive device for doing so.

The problem here is the difference between immersion in oneself and immersion in the object. (It is interesting to note that the Oxfordshire man comments, " We became immersed in spiders.") As an example of immersion in the object, where the object is a person or human situation, I would cite the TV film " Cathy Come Home." As a result of watching that film an astonishing number of people did not retreat into self pity, did not sit down and write about it, but sent money, acted, in the only way they knew how, to alleviate an area of social hardship of which they had clearly been made newly aware. There was no need for them to sit down and give form to the experience; the structuring of the situation in the film did that. On the other hand, I wonder how many people if prompted to sit down and consider seriously what it would be like for them if their children had just been taken into care, their husband had lost his job, and they had to give up their house, would have been motivated to send money to Shelter. I would have thought they would have been more likely to start hoarding money against such a contingency. The difference between these two responses seems to

me to be a subtle one and that is why the desirable response has so often been sought by the worst means in education. The psychological operations involved in the two approaches are difficult to distinguish. The different effects are not.

If we want children to enter into a sympathetic understanding of the poor or the oppressed or the old, then we should research the conditions of life of these people as thoroughly as possible. If this in itself does not generate a sympathetic understanding of what we find, that is, a rational sympathy, then all we can do is feed in more information.

And we can turn to the best fiction available. for it is in the best fiction that we find human situations adequately presented and explored with insight and structured in such a way as to call forth a rational response. We would not value fiction in which there was little insight, in which the situation was false or inadequately realised, in which the author's attitude to his subject was sentimental or cynical so that we were asked for a sentimental or cynical response. The film " Cathy Come Home " presented a biased case and drew forth a sentimental response, but it is still a typical example of *how* we can be led to a sympathetic understanding of what is beyond our own experience.

If we are working with fiction of high quality, we will believe that the experience of reading is valuable in itself in that it will extend, deepen and generally enrich the child's understanding and sympathy. Our concern, then, will be to help the child to as full and true a response as possible. I would think any writing activity legitimate which helped the child to respond more fully to a novel. I think we are in danger of obscuring the real value and function of children's fiction when we use it as a stimulus to writing which moves away from the novel rather than back into it. We are then at the old game of treating writing as an end in itself. I am not saying that we should not explore areas of interest created by the reading of a novel, only that we should not look on it as a stimulus to writing that leads away from it.

As an example of fiction being the end of the line, as it were, rather than writing, we can reconsider the Red Indian study. If the best fiction available does not in any way augment the child's understanding then it is not worth reading. If it does, then it should come at the point most fitted to do so. Thus we would study Red Indian life, proceed with the writing activity suggested, and *then* read the fiction. What we get from a book depends upon what we bring to it. And *then* children are in some position to consider the veracity of what they are reading.

Few cases offer such neatly focused material vis-a-vis content. It is not easy to see how this pattern could be applied quite so precisely to the old, the lonely, etc., because these are different kinds of situation. If fiction is present in abundance it will accommodate these and the many other areas of life which are worthy of exploration. What is clear is that a sympathetic understanding of other people is only attainable through knowledge, knowledge structured to engender rational attitudes, and that we find this in the best fiction. It is certainly not self-generating in the act of writing stimulated by a few emotionally loaded facts or visual aids.

That is just about all I have to say on the subject of children's writing for the time being, but before leaving I want to examine the statement, " Children learn to write by writing."

What does it mean? The crucial phrase is " learn to write." What does *that* mean? If it means " acquire the mechanical ability to write " the statement is mere tautology. What it must and does mean is " learn to write better " whatever that means. Let us leave the " better " undefined for the moment and note that if improvement is to take place, then there must be writing produced by the child within which the improvement *can* take place. But the writing is a context, not a cause as implied by the word " by " rather than, for instance, " in the process of." Because improvement may or may not take place. We all know of children who have produced writing every day of their school lives and yet we would not be able to say that there had been continuous improvement. We might not even be willing to say that at the end of the day the children had learned to write in any worthwhile sense. So the statement is false in that it states as necessary what is clearly contingent. Yet this statement, which seems to have become part of the proverbial wisdom of education, continues to be trotted out. And what it sanctions is the idea that any old subject will do for writing as long as the children *are* writing. It further sanctions the idea that quality can be achieved through quantity.

I would define "good" writing as writing which was a successful instrument in achieving educational ends, and "better" writing as writing which was an even more successful instrument in achieving educational ends. One cannot isolate a cause of this writing. It is sometimes claimed that a lot of talking and discussion leads to good writing so that discussion is recommended as a prelude to writing. But it is difficult to see how discussion is the *cause* of good writing. What one can say is that in any situation where good writing is being produced, purposeful talk and discussion are likely to feature regularly in the situation—as well as a few other things. For instance, there are only two possible sources from which a child can naturally acquire the syntax of writing, his reading and his listening to the written word being read aloud. If his experience of these is limited, it is presumptuous to look for good writing. And the content of his writing will depend on the total situation within which he exists as well as his specific knowledge of the subject he is writing about. Once again, if these are limited it will be presumptuous to look for good writing. These are general environmental features. It seems likely that further preconditions of good writing are the awareness in the child of a clear and worthwhile purpose in what he is being asked to write and a sympathetic and helpful response to what he has written. We are all surely aware of that falling away of interest and perhaps overt sighs and groans when children are asked to produce a piece of writing for its own sake. When the teacher has a clear purpose for the writing beyond the actual production of the writing and this purpose is clear to the children, they write without demur—even with eagerness.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY ANGUS MAC PHEE AND "CITE NEWSLETTER"
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."